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AP Centerpiece: Budget dumps lifetime sex offender GPS tracking

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MADISON, Wis. - Electronic tracking for Wisconsin's worst sex offenders - required under a law signed by Gov. Jim Doyle less than a year ago - would be dramatically scaled back under his two-year budget proposal.

Doyle's budget, unveiled to lawmakers Tuesday night, would require child molesters and sexually violent offenders to wear global positioning bracelets only while they're on supervised release or parole.

That's a significant step back from the law Doyle, a Democrat, signed in May to set up GPS tracking until the offender died or was too feeble to pose a threat. The Republican-sponsored law is due to take effect in July.

State Rep. Scott Suder, R-Abbotsford, its main author, said he was shocked at Doyle's changes. He accused the governor of going back on his word.

"This, in essence, takes away most of our ability to track these monsters. I'm left with my jaw wide open," Suder said Wednesday. "He signed the bill. He highlighted the bill throughout his campaign. Now he is nothing short of gutting the bill. I find it appalling."

Doyle spokesman Matt Canter insisted the governor believes "cutting edge" technology should be used to monitor sex offenders. But after he told the state Department of Corrections to implement the law, the agency found what Canter termed "structural issues" with it.

Susan Crawford, executive assistant to Corrections Secretary Matt Frank, said the governor and the agency have concluded GPS tracking isn't a good tool for monitoring sex offenders who are no longer under government supervision. The system would do little to prevent offenders from committing new crimes; it would simply allow investigators to piece together their movements after the fact.

The technology is much more useful when combined with other tools used in supervision, such as polygraph testing and restricting an offender's movements, she said, adding offenders on lifetime supervision would be subject to lifetime tracking.

When asked why Doyle, who faced re-election in November, didn't realize that before he signed the bill, Crawford said "it took a lot of analysis on our part. The bill went through the Legislature rather quickly."

The bill spent about 10 months in the Legislature. The governor signed it four days after he got it.

Canter denied Doyle's approval of the bill had anything to do with bolstering his re-election chances.

"He wanted to do it and the state under his leadership is going to do it," Canter said.

The law requires the state Department of Corrections to use GPS technology to track for life serious child

molesters, offenders determined to be sexually violent predators and anyone found innocent of a serious child sex offense by reason of mental illness.

The measure also requires the department to establish zones where such offenders couldn't linger. The agency would ensure the tracking devices alert the department or local police if offenders violate the zones.

A number of states have similar offender lifetime GPS tracking requirements. Doyle hailed the measure the day he signed it, saying it would help police know where offenders are at any moment.

But questions have lingered about both the law's constitutionality and cost.

Three University of Wisconsin-Madison law professors issued an opinion earlier this month saying the law is unconstitutional because it amounts to extra punishment and the government can't submit someone no longer under its supervision to tracking.

The Corrections Department requested about \$24 million and nearly 235 new positions to implement the law over the next two years. Doyle's budget proposal cuts the funding to \$11 million and 122 positions.

Under Doyle's plan, the Corrections Department could choose between active and passive monitoring. In active monitoring, the tracking devices send real-time updates of an offender's location. Under the passive approach, supervisors would download a list of the offender's locations from his or her tracker when it was recharged.

Passive tracking is cheaper, Crawford said, adding high-risk offenders would still be on active tracking.

Doyle's budget now goes to the legislative Joint Finance Committee - divided evenly between Democrats and Republicans - which will spend the next few months revising it.

The budget must pass the state Assembly and Senate before going back to Doyle, who can use his veto power to make changes before signing it.

Suder vowed to restore the law as he wrote it.

"The bill is to make certain we know where these monsters are every second of every day," he said. "(Doyle) is not in tune with the general public. The general public wants to track dangerous child sex predators."